

**December, 2007**

**Vol. I, Issue 4**

**Inside this issue:**

<i>News from the Director</i>	1
<i>Holiday Gift Cards</i>	1
<i>Governor Patrick Unveils 5 Point Foreclosure Program</i>	1
<i>Commissioner's Corner</i>	2
<i>Consumer Shopping Tips</i>	2
<i>TV Conversion from Analog to Digital</i>	2
<i>ID Theft: What You Need to Know</i>	2

## **Consumer Affairs Agencies:**

*Division of Banks*

*Division of Insurance*

*Division of Professional Licensure*

*Department of Telecommunications and Cable*

*Division of Standards*

*State Racing Commission*

**Massachusetts Office of Consumer Affairs & Business Regulation**

# **THE CONSUMER INSIDER**

## **News from the Director**

With 2008 fast approaching, now is the time to look back at what we accomplished together in the past year and look ahead to the challenges that await us in the new one.

First, our statewide listening tour was a tremendous success. I enjoyed hearing directly from consumers across our Commonwealth about the issues that matter most to them. I look forward to incorporating your ideas into our 2008 agenda.

Second, much progress was made on the legislative front. The Governor signed comprehensive ID Theft prevention legislation and landmark mortgage legislation. These new laws stand as significant consumer

protection achievements in 2007 and will have a positive impact on the quality of life in Massachusetts for the foreseeable future.

On our immediate horizon is the ongoing implementation of managed competition in the auto insurance market. This change is already producing real and lasting benefits for consumers—lower rates for good drivers everywhere and better products for all consumers. I fully expect that these positive trends will continue as consumers begin shopping around for their best rates and policies in 2008.

Happy holidays and best wishes for a safe and healthy new year!



## **Holiday Gift Cards**

Before you purchase a gift card this holiday season—or if you receive a gift card—here are some of the important terms and conditions you should be aware of:

- Under MA Law, a gift certificate or gift card must be redeemable for 7 years from the date of issue.
- Once 90% of the card's value has been redeemed, the balance is redeemable in cash.
- Make sure you know whether fees apply to the card (e.g. monthly fees, inactivity fees, etc.).
- Find out the rules for lost or stolen cards. Can you get a replacement card? If, so is there a fee?
- A store gift card often can be used only at one store while cards with a credit card logo can be used at many locations.
- If your gift card is not working properly is there a toll-free number to make a complaint and get the problem fixed?

If information about fees or expiration dates are on a separate document make sure you give this information to the recipient.

## **Governor Patrick Unveils 5 Point Foreclosure Prevention Program**

On October 18, 2007, Undersecretary Crane and Division of Banks Commissioner Steven Antonakes traveled to Lawrence to join Governor Deval Patrick, state and local officials, non-profit leaders, mortgage lenders and city homeowners to unveil a comprehensive foreclosure prevention plan designed to keep people in their homes and stabilize neighborhoods across the Commonwealth.

In the past year, more than 25,000 foreclosures were filed in Massachusetts, a 76% increase over the same period last year. The administration's targeted initiative consists of the following parts: neighborhood stabilization pilot programs in six communities, transition resources from lenders and servicers, consumer outreach and education, lending best practices, and coordination to increase utilization of MassHousing's loan refinancing program.

Homeowners facing foreclosure should call Neighborworks' Center for Foreclosure Solution's 24 hour a day, 7 day a week toll free hotline 888-995-HOPE. Neighborworks mortgage counselors will refer Massachusetts homeowners to non-profit agencies for additional housing counseling.



Governor Patrick and Director Crane talk about foreclosures in Massachusetts.

**Consumer Hotline:**

**888-283-3757 or 617-973-8787**

## Commissioner's Corner

*The third in a series introducing readers to OCA Commissioners*



Sharon E. Gillett was appointed by Governor Patrick in the spring of 2007 to head the Department of Telecommunications and Cable. Prior to serving in state government, Commissioner Gillett was a Principal Research Associate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) where she chaired the Broadband Working Group of MIT's Communications Futures Program and taught courses on telecommunications and Internet policy.

She also conducted research on municipal broadband and its economic impact and served on Boston Mayor Thomas Menino's Wireless Broadband Task Force. Commissioner Gillett received her MBA and MS in Technology and Policy from MIT and her AB in Physics from Harvard University.

Commissioner Gillett is responsible for overseeing state regulatory functions pertaining to telecommunications and cable services, including promoting competition and consumer protection and responding to carrier and consumer inquiries and complaints. She also advises the state on broadband policy. Commissioner Gillett played a leading role in developing the Patrick Administration's \$25 million broadband bond bill currently before the Legislature. This innovative legislation aims to bring high-speed Internet to the state's 32 unserved communities by 2010.

## Getting Ready for the Conversion from Analog to Digital Television

At midnight on February 17, 2009, full power broadcast stations will be required to stop broadcasting in analog format. Digital TV will replace the analog system.

There are several ways to prepare for this:

- Buy a new TV that has a built-in ATSC tuner.
- Buy a Digital-to-Analog Converter Box.
- Subscribe to a Cable TV or Satellite TV service.

Since VCRs and DVD players also have built-in analog NTSC tuners, they are also subject to the effects of the analog cut-off date.

In an effort to help curb the cost impact for analog TV owners, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) and the U.S. Department of Commerce developed a converter box program to allow analog TV owners to request coupons towards the purchase of a digital-to-analog converter box.

The coupons will be available from January 1, 2008 to March 31, 2009. All households that own a TV using over-the-air analog reception are eligible.

Coupons, which will look like plastic gift cards, will be redeemable through local electronic stores.

All U.S. households may request two \$40 coupons for the purchase of digital-to-analog converter boxes beginning on January 1, 2008 by calling 888-DTV-2009.

For more information about the digital transition and the Coupon Program, go to [www.ntia.doc.gov/dtvcoupon](http://www.ntia.doc.gov/dtvcoupon).

## Consumer Shopping Tips

As the holidays approach, consumers make regular trips to crowded stores and malls. Scam artists know this and are likely to be there, too. Here are some helpful tips to protect yourself while you're out and about during the holiday season:

- Clean out your wallet or purse and remove unnecessary credit and debit cards, Social Security cards, and other unneeded documents that could compromise your identity if lost or stolen.
- Be sure credit card receipts that you receive from merchants do not contain your full account number.
- Be aware of a store's return policy.
- When purchasing gift cards, be aware of expiration dates, fees, and what will happen if the card is lost or stolen.
- Use a credit card to pay for your purchases.
- Take precautions to protect your personal safety (e.g. shop in well-lit areas, keep your eyes on your wallet and/or purse, be aware when entering/exiting your vehicle, etc.).
- When shopping online, make sure that encryption technology is used before you provide your personal information. Use a credit card.
- Check a website's privacy policy before providing personal information online.

## ID Theft: What You Need to Know

Identity theft occurs when someone uses your personal identifying information, like your name, Social Security number, credit card number, or other financial account information, without your permission, to commit fraud or other crimes.

Skilled thieves may use a variety of methods to get hold of your information, including dumpster diving, skimming, phishing, changing your address, stealing your wallet or mail, and pretexting.

The best way to find out if you are a victim of identity theft is to monitor your accounts and bank statements each month, and check your credit report regularly.

If your identity is stolen, file a police report, check your credit reports, notify creditors, and dispute any unauthorized transactions.

Contact the [Federal Trade Commission](http://www.ftc.gov) to report the theft by telephone toll-free at 1-877-ID THEFT (877-438-4338), or by mail to Consumer Response Center, 600 Pennsylvania Ave, N.W., Washington, DC 20580.

Call the fraud units of the three principal credit reporting companies:

[Equifax](http://www.equifax.com)  
(800) 525-6285

[Trans Union](http://www.transunion.com)  
(800) 680-7289

[Experian \(formerly TRW\)](http://www.experian.com)  
(888) EXPERIAN or (888) 397-3742